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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 000195

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR NEA/FO, NEA/ELA  
ALSO FOR IO/PDAS WARLICK  
P FOR DRUSSELL AND RRANGASWAMY  
USUN FOR WOLFF/GERMAIN/SCHEDLBAUER  
NSC FOR MCDERMOTT, SHAPIRO

E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/16/2019  
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KDEM](#) [PINS](#) [LE](#)  
SUBJECT: LEBANON: ELECTION OBSERVERS DECREE MOVING AHEAD;  
LOWERING VOTING AGE COMING?

REF: BEIRUT 1612

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4  
(b) and (d).

SUMMARY

1. (C) In a February 18 meeting hosted by the UN, Minister of Interior Ziyad Baroud reported he had sent the draft decree to invite international observers to monitor the June 2009 parliamentary elections to the Cabinet to be placed on the agenda for the February 26 session. Earlier, in a February 13 meeting, Baroud said that the Ministry of Interior still lacked time, technical means, and the money necessary to properly prepare for the elections. Baroud has also announced that early voting could begin on June 4 for polling station workers.

2. (C) In a surprise move, Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri said that a parliamentary session scheduled for Thursday, February 19, will include discussion on lowering the voting age from 21 to 18. Berri has called for the actual vote to lower the voting age to take place on March 19. In a February 16 speech, Hizballah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah also called for lowering the voter age to 18 and urged heavy voter turnout in the upcoming elections. End Summary.

WAITING FOR COM "STAMP OF APPROVAL"  
FOR INTERNATIONAL OBSERVERS

3. (C) In a February 18 meeting, hosted by UN Special Coordinator for Lebanon (UNSCOL) Michael Williams, Minister of Interior Ziyad Baroud answered a number of questions on the administration of the June 7 election posed to him by foreign Ambassadors and civil society leaders. Baroud said he received interagency clearance on the draft decree to invite international observers and hopes that the Council of Ministers will approve it at its February 26 session. Baroud highlighted the fact that Article 20 of the new electoral law makes it possible for the Cabinet to accredit international election observers. No political groups challenged this idea during the discussion of the new electoral law some months ago which, Baroud said, makes him confident that this issue will move forward. He added that he wants to protect all

observation missions from "political scrutiny," which is why he himself drafted the ministerial decree.

¶4. (C) He said he supports missions from the EU, Carter Center, National Democratic Institute (NDI,) and Arab League (reftel). Baroud added the Arab League participation in the elections would be important to give the international community involvement a balanced composition.

¶5. (C) Baroud added that providing security for all election observers would be impossible. He said that the Internal Security Forces (ISF) would be able to offer protection for VIP members in the different observer missions, but the ISF would not be able to protect all observers on elections day. He said the difficulty in providing security arises because the missions would most likely be spread out around the country.

NEED TO PRINT MORE ID  
CARDS AND PASSPORTS  
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¶6. (C) In addition, on February 13, the Ambassador, accompanied by USAID Administrator's Special Assistant for the Middle East George Laudato, USAID Director, and PolEconOff, met with Minister of Interior Baroud. Baroud said 600,000 national ID cards need to be printed before election day. (Note: The new electoral law allows voters to use either their national ID cards or their passports as acceptable forms of identification on election day, as opposed to the very specific Voter ID Card, that was

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controversially required in previous elections. End Note.) Baroud added that when the Ministry of Interior began issuing national ID cards back in 1996, it took two-three years to receive one. This was due to a lack of resources and GOL bureaucracy. However, since October 2008, the Ministry has printed 100,000 national ID cards for voters.

¶7. (C) There are now 47 regional registration offices where voters can receive their ID cards, as opposed to the previous single Beirut station. The Ministry received equipment from the Germans that will fully equip 12 of these locations. Baroud said the Ministry is still waiting for UNDP to provide the necessary equipment to fully equip the remaining 35 stations. He added that the Ministry launched a media campaign to publicize the necessity of voters to apply for their ID cards in order to vote in the elections.

¶8. (C) Baroud also said additional GOL funding would be necessary to issue new passports. The Cabinet decided on February 13 to issue 150,000 passports for expatriates so that they can take part in the upcoming elections. Currently Lebanese embassies and consulates abroad cannot issue new passports quickly. (Note: During the February 18 meeting, Baroud said the British company contracted to help produce the extra passports can only produce passports in quantities of 500,000 or more and would be unable to provide only 150,000. End Note.)

OPPOSITION TAKES UP THE CALL  
TO LOWER THE VOTER AGE?  
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¶9. (C) On February 13, Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri said that an upcoming parliamentary session will include discussion on lowering the voter age from 21 to 18. (Note: This was proposed as a key reform by the Boutros Commission. However, this reform did not become part of the new law passed in October 2008. End Note.) Richard Chambers, Country Director for the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES), said that the move resembles an earlier effort by Hizballah MPs, who called for a similar discussion to take place soon after the 2008 electoral law was passed in October 2008. According to Chambers, Berri is

calling for either an amendment to the Constitution to specify a voting age of 18 years, or an amendment to the 2008 electoral law that specifies a voting age of 18 years.

¶10. (SBU) Chambers said Parliament is unlikely to adopt such an amendment, but passage is not completely out of the question and this would create additional "last-minute" work for the Ministry. Baroud would have to consider how to update the voter registry (a voter cannot cast a ballot if he or she is not included in the official voter registry,) how many more polling stations to add, what kind of additional voter education materials would be needed, and what donors/technical advisory groups to approach for further assistance. (Note: Baroud also noted at the UN meeting that lowering the voter age to 18 before the June 7 parliamentary elections is unfeasible legally. However, he hoped the amendment would pass so that 18 year olds could vote in the 2010 municipal elections. End Note.)

¶11. (SBU) In an February 16 "An-Nahar" press interview, Berri said he will not allow "the marginalization" of 18-year old citizens. He added that all parliamentary opposition blocs will work hard to allow this age group to vote as practiced throughout the world. An-Nahar quoted "parliamentary sources" as saying that if the amendment is passed, the changes will not take effect in time for the upcoming June elections, but be in place for the next municipality elections in 2010. In a February 16 speech, Hizballah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah also called for lowering the voter age to 18 and urged citizens to participate heavily in the upcoming elections.

#### EARLY VOTING DATE ANNOUNCED

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¶12. (SBU) The Ministry issued a memorandum on February 12 confirming that the date of early voting for polling officials will be June 4. (Note: The new electoral law stipulates the polling stations officials working on the June 7 general election day, are allowed to vote early on June 4. There are around 5,000 polling station officials. End Note.)

According to Chambers, the Ministry still needs to clarify where the early voting will take place, who runs the early voting process, when the votes are counted, etc. Another concern is the announcement of the results of polling stations where early voting takes place, according to Chambers. For example, if early voting results are published in the usual way, everyone will know how the 200 teachers in Metn voted (since many polling station officials will be teachers). This could create challenges to the secrecy of the vote and open up possibilities for intimidation.

#### COMMENT

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¶13. (C) Lowering the voting age now, fewer than four months before election day, would cause a logistical headache. Although opposition Shia leaders Berri and Nasrallah are advocating the move, it is not entirely clear who would benefit politically. Analysts tell us that in some swing key districts where the confessional balance is mixed between Shia and Christian voters, reducing the voter age would benefit the March 8/Aoun alliance, because younger Shia voters would supposedly back Aoun. However, in predominantly Christian districts, reducing the voter age may benefit March 14 because the majority of younger Christian voters tend to support Samir Geagea's Lebanese Forces (LF) over Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement (FPM). In the university elections (an important political indicator in Lebanon), LF candidates beat out their FPM rivals by significant margins. End Comment.

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